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'Good often does evil': JRR Tolkien on 'the most tragic moment' in The Lord of the Rings

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Fiona Macdonald

(Credit: Alamy)

In 1968, the BBC broadcast extracts from JRR Tolkien's last ever recorded interview, 31 years after The Hobbit was published. In 2019, the full video was unearthed from the archive.

JRR Tolkien's The Hobbit begins with Gandalf the wizard visiting Bilbo, the titular hobbit, and persuading him to go on a dangerous quest. But would the British author himself have accepted the challenge? "If a wizard had come to me as a small boy, the situation would be totally different than that in The Hobbit," Tolkien revealed in a rare interview, filmed by the BBC in 1968. "I should have found some excuse for not going… I had no desire whatever to place myself in an awkward position just for the sake of adventure."

Besides, he added, "I'd been very well brought up to avoid conversations with dubious old gentlemen."

Yet this admission was never broadcast. Only a few extracts from the interview made it onto television in 1968, while most of it was stored deep in the BBC archive until it was unearthed for **a radio programme** in 2019. The previously unseen and unheard footage features startling moments of candour from the author of The Hobbit and **The Lord of the Rings**, and reveals Tolkien's thoughts on key characters in his **bestselling books**.

WATCH: 'I think the most tragic point in the whole story is how the good often does evil'

The Hobbit was first published on 21 September 1937, and the calendar week around then has since been designated "Tolkien Week" in celebration. In **the 1968 interview**, Tolkien told the BBC about a hiking trip in Switzerland in 1911, when he was just 19, that inspired his **much-loved epic**.

"One of the cardinal things in The Hobbit is one of the few adventures I ever went through in my life," he said. "We crossed many mountain passes… We wore only packs on our back. We slept in the most extraordinary places. We had some narrow escapes from death, rather like the one with the rocks from the giants, and so on. And I think that's why, really, [Bilbo's] journey is an actual personal experience – altered, of course. We met no goblin."

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Tolkien also discussed **the invented languages** in his fantasy novels. He traced them back to the time when he was studying classics at the University of Oxford, and he was distracted by an unusual hobby – learning Finnish. "Its formation, its sound texture is very remarkable," he said. "It actually makes me quite intoxicated. I just went away

life quite intoxicated. I just went away and learnt this when I should have been doing other things, and people couldn't make out why my essays on Greek drama were getting worse and worse."

The tragedy of Gollum

That passion made its way into the language of Middle-earth, he said. "It started out by being extremely Finnish… It's, as you might say, on a Finnish basis, with a certain amount of Greek thrown in and other languages I've learned since."

Tolkien's love of languages started at an early age and continued after he returned from **fighting in World War One** and took a job as an assistant at the Oxford English Dictionary. "I was employed to do etymologies, and I ran into quite a lot of very interesting etymologies in that time," he said in 1968. "Winter, walrus, wampum, various things of that kind. It was through having to do an etymology of wampum that I first made any acquaintance with the Algonquin languages of Eastern America. So it's a wonderful place, a dictionary."

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Perhaps the most insightful revelation in the interview came when Tolkien was discussing Gollum, the spiteful troglodyte played by Andy Serkis in Peter Jackson's films of The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings. The author described the character as "an example of corruption", and lit up when asked about a key scene in The Lord of the Rings: Gollum is with the novel's hero, Frodo, and almost reforms.

"The incident he's talking about is when Gollum is actually beginning to change back to Sméagol [his earlier, less

monstrous self]," said Stuart Lee, a Professor of English at the University of Oxford, in **a 2019 radio programme** about the lost Tolkien recordings. "He's winning the battle – the good side is winning through and he tries to stroke Frodo, who's asleep." But then Frodo's best friend Sam intervenes…

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"People have often asked me what moves me most," said Tolkien. "I think the most tragic point in the whole story is the terrible irony that good often does evil. The most tragic moment is when Sam in his protectiveness says, 'Take your hands off.' And therefore defeats Gollum's repentance. Because that seems to be very true to life."

Although Sam is only trying to protect his friend, his action causes Gollum to revert to his evil side. This speaks to Tolkien's wider world view, says Lee. "What happens in his mythology is that good can sometimes do excessive evil unintentionally."

In the BBC footage, the interviewer commented that the morality in Tolkien's books isn't as simple as good versus evil. "The general lines are rather simple," said the author. "But of course, as a matter of fact it isn't really, is it? You see evil on the good side. It isn't just goodies against baddies, as they call it modern parlance."

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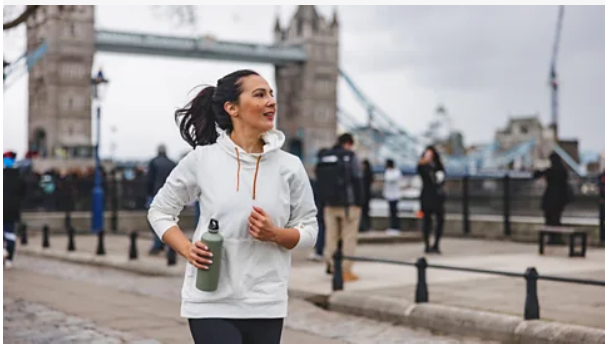

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